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SUBJECT: Senegal's Casamance-Trials and Tribulations

DAKAR 00000896 001.2 OF 002

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The troubled Casamance region of Southern Senegal is facing yet another crisis following the dissolution of Air Senegal International. Already cut off from the rest of the country by the Gambia, local tour operators are extremely worried that without regular flights the upcoming tourist season will be cancelled, leaving many unemployed. Meanwhile, acts of banditry by rebels associated with the Mouvement des Forces Democratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) have seen a recent spike, although the military has bolstered its presence in response. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) According to Tehe Faye, representative of the Ministry of Tourism in Ziguinchor, since Air Senegal stopped working there has been a 25 percent drop in hotel occupancy rate in Ziguinchor and in the tourist zone of Cap Skirring only three hotels are open and none of them have any guests, "We're preparing for next season, but frankly we have no idea how that's going to pan out. We are looking to work with tour operators so that they fly their charter planes directly to Ziguinchor or to Cap Skirring itself." Faye noted Club Med is the key holiday resort in the area and that they are planning to open late this upcoming season, 'If Club Med leaves, we are in deep trouble. They employ over 200 people from the local economy. So far, there is no indication that they will leave, but you never know.' Faye went on to say that Minister Karim Wade, whose portfolio includes Civil Aviation, had been to visit and that he had promised that a new airline will be up and running by October. Faye's view mirrored that of Pascal Ehembé who is the owner of Ziguinchor's best hotel and the President of the Chamber of Commerce, "This area needs much more investment. Clearly the one boat (from Dakar) is not enough and we need more flights. Additionally, I am trying to set up a credit fund to allow people access to cheap credit."

Is the MFDC Back?

¶13. (SBU) Both Faye and Ehembé are worried about a recent spike in banditry in the region, saying that it compounds the problems that the region is facing especially in term of presenting the area as a safe place for tourism. Faye however noted, "While this is bad for our image, I have been told by some MFDC leaders that the rise in these attacks is less about economics and more about cracks within the movement itself whereby some dissidents are trying to establish themselves. But if we go another year without tourism, who knows what may happen." Faye acknowledged that the arrival of a new Mayor from the ruling Democratic Party of Senegal (PDS) may bolster investment in the area and offset some of the effects of the downturn in tourism as the government opens up the state coffers which it had kept tightly shut under the previous administration of Socialist Mayor Robert Sagna.

¶14. (SBU) This view was confirmed by Mamadou Konté, who is Mayor Abdoulaye Balde's right hand in Ziguinchor, "We have major plans both to rehabilitate the city's roads and its sewage and water

systems. Balde (who is also the Secretary-General of the Presidency) will be here every weekend to oversee the projects and meet with people." Konte, however, did aver that unsafe roads are bad in terms of the upcoming planting season, "If the roads are not safe, then truckers carrying seeds and fertilizers will refuse to come. Last year we produced 104,000 tons of cereal and had 1800 mm of rainfall, so we have great hope for a repeat performance this year. In my view, we not only need to talk to the rebels, but we need to establish enterprises in their zones so that they have jobs to go to when they put down their arms. Without jobs, talking is just that."

¶5. (SBU) "[President Abdoulaye] Wade is not interested in talking or resolving our problems. In his view, the fighters should just stop fighting and talk. He has not only alienated The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, but he mistakenly thinks that enough money thrown at the problem will make it go away," said Abba Diatta, an old school, dyed-in-the-wool Socialist politician who was former Mayor Sagna's right hand for 26 years. Diatta was considerably more downbeat than other local leaders, saying that Wade has a history of reneging when it comes to the Casamance, "When Wade was a Minister in [former President Abdou] Diouf's government he promised Abbe Diamacounde's (The founder of the MFDC) brother that he would grant autonomy if he ever got elected President. When he came to power, he totally reversed his position. If there is no resolution to the conflict soon, I expect that the level of violence will pick up again. The only reason it hasn't is because local groups comprised of elders, women, and youth have been constantly engaged to persuade the MFDC and its various factions to end the violence."

Comment

¶6. (SBU) As usual, the Casamance finds itself at a crossroads. While over the past few months there has been an increase in

DAKAR 00000896 002.2 OF 002

banditry by MFDC-related groups, a bolstered military presence seems to have stemmed the tide for now. The tourism situation is dire and until a new airline reconnects Ziguinchor to the rest of the country, the region will continue to experience economic troubles and rising unemployment. However, these troubles may be offset by money coming in the form of new investments by Mayor Balde, who is eager to prove to both the people of the Casamance and to the President that the PDS can deliver on its promises and improve the lives of people. Another factor to watch will be the upcoming harvest. If the rains are good and the harvest plentiful, then the government will breathe a considerable sigh of relief. However, should the opposite be the case, then the region will bear watching as a poor harvest, a bad economy, and an unengaged government may be the spark for renewed conflict.

Smith